
BOOKS & WRITERS

The Memory Theatre

By Marshall McLuhan

IT IS PERHAPS characteristic of many areas of human interest that whenever a new technology appears it should act as a mirror for the preceding technologies. In this century electric memories have introduced an entirely new skill into the storing and retrieving of information. By microcard it is now possible to have the contents of all the libraries of the world on one desk top. Preceding this development by several decades had come the rediscovery of the corporate memories of whole societies. Folklorists and anthropologists had recovered the tribal and social memories of whole cultures at the same time that the symbolist poets had come to regard language itself as the inclusive storehouse of racial memories. *The Art of Memory* presented by Frances Yates¹ concerns the techniques devised in the early stages of phonetic literacy to provide not a corporate but a private memory for literate people. It was not only the orator who had need of an artificial memory for the marshalling of his *narratio* (events, and things) and for the management of his figures of words and emotions and arguments. The advent of the manuscript book made an artificial memory necessary to readers as well as to orators since the slowness of reading manuscripts made it difficult to use them as works of reference.

The mechanically produced, or printed book, was an altogether different matter, both as a storage and as a retrieval system. Printing spurred a great revival and development of the artificial memory system during the Renaissance. Indeed, this is one of the main themes of *The Art of Memory*. Printing gave easy access to the traditional treatises but gradually made the cultivation of an artificial memory seem quite superfluous.

With this study of the fourth branch of traditional rhetoric Dr. Yates has almost closed a technological gap, as it were. The first branch of rhetoric, *Inventio*, or discovery, in many respects

the most complex of all the branches, has yet to be studied with the care that Dr. Yates has given to *Memoria*, and that others have given to *Dispositio*, *Elocutio* and *Actio*. B. L. Joseph's book *Elizabethan Acting* (1951) is an instance of the study of *Actio*, or *Pronuntiatio*, the fifth part of traditional rhetoric. Walter Ong's study of Ramus (1958) handles *Dispositio*. *Elocutio*, or the figures of style and the doctrine of decorum, has had most of the attention in recent years. But Dr. Yates is the first to give serious attention to *Memoria*.

So rich is the subject that even her incidental observations are very rewarding. For example, in alluding to E. Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* she indicates not only that the medieval cathedral was a memory theatre but so, in large part, were the scholastic Summas. Moreover:

That Dante's *Inferno* could be regarded as a kind of memory system for memorising Hell and its punishments with striking images on orders of places, will come as a great shock, and I must leave it as a shock. It would take a whole book to work out the implications of such an approach to Dante's poem.

She cites:

The *Phoenix, sive artificiosa memoria* (first edition at Venice in 1491) by Peter of Ravenna became the most universally known of all the memory text books.

The Joyce student will recognise the relation of this title to the Phoenix Playhouse section of *Finnegans Wake* which strategically precedes Joyce's section on The Trivium and the Quadrivium.

Dr. Yates begins her study with the classical techniques in use in the ancient world.

... The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of *loci* or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place systems used was the architectural type. The clearest description of the process is that given by

¹ *The Art of Memory*. By FRANCES A. YATES. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 63s.

Quintilian. In order to form a series of places in memory, he says, a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied a one as possible, the fore-court, the living-room, bedrooms, and parlours, not omitting statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated.

The reader of Siegfried Giedion's *The Beginnings of Architecture* will realise that enclosed or architectural space is a relatively late development indicative of a high visual culture. Dr. Yates is not concerned with the technologies that foster a visual gradient in a culture. The most potent of all such technologies is the phonetic alphabet. Today, with the rise of nuclear physics and its non-visualisable speeds and data, our Western world is losing its visual orientation. It is perhaps this decline of the visual in our electronic world that renders us increasingly sensitive to the culture and qualities of pre-literate peoples. The use of architectural form for the "places" of memory is highly significant of the intense visual stress created by the new literacy. Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) is also a study useful to students of *Memoria*. Havelock is concerned with the educational establishment that preceded the literate one. There was a corporate memory theatre, or "tribal encyclopedia" of memorised poetry that preceded the contrived "places" of the private memory theatre. It is Havelock's claim that Plato's war on the poets was systematically directed against this tribal memory theatre as the prevalent system of education.

Associated with the "places" were the images to be placed in these locations. She quotes the *Ad Herennium*:

We ought, then, to set up images of a kind that can adhere longest in memory. And we shall do so if we establish similitudes as striking as possible; if we set up images that are not many or vague but active (*imagines agentes*); if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness; if we ornament some of them, as with crowns or purple cloaks, so that the similitude may be more distinct to us. . . .

It was held that "the duty of an instructor in mnemonics is to teach the method of making images." When the Schoolmen translated Aristotle's phrase *nous poietikos* they used the words "*intellectus agens*" or the agent intellect. The function of the agent or making intellect extends to the very idea of knowing. Knowing as making is an idea central to Aristotle and Aquinas. Basic to the *imagines agentes* is the poetic or making process, *Inventio*. Perhaps Dr. Yates does not sufficiently stress this multi-sensuous involvement in making that characterises *imagines agentes*. It is this highly creative function in the art of *Memoria* that made it natural for

St. Augustine to relate memory and the very principle of identity.

THE ART OF MEMORY, while relying on architectural modes, was by no means merely pictorial in character. That is to say, pictorial or visual space has special properties of uniformity, continuity and connectedness which are not to be found in our other senses. The indifference to merely visual or "rational" space even in the later Middle Ages is the theme of D. W. Robertson's *Preface to Chaucer* (1963). The stress on non-visual space before the Renaissance helps to explain one of the problems that Dr. Yates encounters:

Very singular is the art of this invisible art of memory. It reflects ancient architecture but in an unclassical spirit, concentrating its choice on irregular places and avoiding symmetrical orders. It is full of human imagery of a very personal kind; we mark the tenth place with a face like that of our friend Decimus; we see a number of our acquaintances standing in a row; we visualise a sick man like the man himself, or if we did not know him, like someone we do know. These human figures are active and dramatic, strikingly beautiful or grotesque. They remind one more of figures in some Gothic cathedral than of classical art proper. They appear to be completely amoral, their function being solely to give an emotional impetus to memory by their personal idiosyncrasy or their strangeness. This impression may, however, be due to the fact that we have not been given a specimen image of how to remember, for example, the "things" justice or temperance and their parts, which are treated by the author of *Ad Herennium* when discussing the intervention of the subject matter of a speech. The elusiveness of the art of memory is very trying to its historian.

The same iconic and discontinuous character belongs in a special degree to all the figures of rhetoric. The rediscovery of the advantages and attractiveness of the iconic mode came in with the Gothic revival and is central to the entire symbolist movement.

WHEN VALÉRY observes that the traditional figures of rhetoric portray postures of mind in act, he may well have provided the needful means of recognising the renewed relevance of these iconic patterns. The revival of patristic and scholastic forms of thought at the end of the nineteenth century seems to express a similar preference for abrupt contours of abstract art forms in contrast to the chiaroscuro and gradations of conventional pictorial art and prose. In *Modern Painters* (1843-60) John Ruskin insisted upon the same quality of abruptness and discontinuity in celebrating the advantages

of Gothic art. He anticipates, as it were, a manifesto of Pop art in this connection:

... Hence it is an infinite good to mankind when there is full acceptance of the grotesque, slightly sketched or expressed; and, if field for such expression be frankly granted, an enormous mass of intellectual power is turned to everlasting use, which, in this present century of ours, evaporates in street gibing or vain revelling: all the good wit and satire expiring in daily talk (like foam on wine) which in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had a permitted and useful expression in the arts of sculpture and illumination, like foam fixed into chalcedony.

Ruskin's insights seem not to have been lost upon Rimbaud whose *Illuminations* are structured on the Ruskinian principle of the grotesque as a multi-dimensional art of discontinuity. Rimbaud had spent some time in England prior to the making of *Illuminations*.

... It is with a view (not the least important among many others bearing upon art) to the re-openings of this great field of human intelligence, long entirely closed, that I am striving to introduce Gothic architecture into daily domestic use; and to revive the art of illumination, properly so called; not the art of miniature-painting in books, or on vellum, which has ridiculously been confused with it; but of making *writing*, simple writing, beautiful to the eye, by investing it with the great chord of perfect colour, blue, purple, scarlet, white, and gold, and in that chord of colour, permitting the continual play of the fancy of the writer in every species of grotesque imagination, carefully excluding shadow; the distinctive difference between illumination and painting proper, being, that illumination admits no shadows, but only gradations of pure colour.

Ruskin is insistent that illumination is non-pictorial and non-visual in its structural mode. Visual or pictorial space as such is restricted to the qualities of continuity, uniformity, and connectiveness. These pictorial qualities are rare both in the ancient and medieval worlds. What is characteristic of the ancient and medieval world is *formal* rather than pictorial space, and formal space is iconic and abrupt. It was this discovery of disparity between pictorial and formal space that made possible Robertson's *Preface to Chaucer*.

The later nineteenth century had become disenchanted with pictorial space and the Pre-Raphaelites strove to recapture iconic and formal qualities in art. Much understanding of this entire matter is also to be found in Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* which is a study of the detribalisation of the Greeks as they moved out of the auditory spaces and postures of the poetic establishment into the Euclidean continuum of the Platonic ideas.

Letters of Wallace Stevens

Edited by HOLLY STEVENS

Eight hundred letters by Stevens, with a number written to him, and passages from his Journal. The material, which has been edited and annotated by his daughter, makes a full and revealing portrait of this great American poet. 7 gns

A Choice of Browning's Verse

Edited by EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH

"Browning is a kind of quarry, from which modern poetry continues to be hewn": Mr Lucie-Smith's anthology is personal and refreshing. He discusses Browning's verse and his influence in a stimulating Introduction. Cloth-bound edition 21/-; Faber paper-covered edition, 9/6.

The Colossus

SYLVIA PLATH

The impact of *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath's last book of poems, has renewed interest in *The Colossus*, in which her earlier work is collected. The book is now re-issued, after having been out of print for several years. 18/-

Introduction 3

Stories by new writers. "The overall standard is impressive, and matches the excellence of the previous volumes. . . . This venture is one of the best of its kind." - KAY DICK, *Sunday Times*. The contributors are Rachel Bush, Christopher Hampton, Michael Hoyland, Roy Watkins, John Whewy. 25/-

Influencing Voters

RICHARD ROSE

"The peculiar value of this important book lies in its demonstration of the continuing incompetence of politicians confronted by modern methods of publicity. . . . A very full account of the parties' propaganda activities, based mainly on the 1964 experience." - HUGO YOUNG, *Sunday Times*. Illustrated. 42/-

— FABER & FABER —

THE ART OF MEMORY by Frances Yates can now be placed among these memorable studies that have recaptured major dimensions of Western culture long masked by post-Renaissance habits of perception. Among the numerous matters related to the art of memory which Dr. Yates simply by-passes, if only because of their obviousness, is the tradition of the arts of meditation. *The Poetry of Meditation* by Louis L. Martz (1954) might be introduced as an appendix to *The Art of Memory*. Any sample from Martz can illustrate how similar were the methods of meditation and of memory (one need only think of the Stations of the Cross, or the Decades of the Rosary in the same connection, not to mention the liturgical year). In introducing the religious exercises of St. Ignatius, Martz observes:

... But the first prelude is the famous "composition of place, seeing the spot"—a practice of enormous importance for religious poetry. For here, says St. Ignatius, "in contemplation or meditation on visible matters, such as the contemplation of Christ our Lord, Who is visible, the composition will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing I wish to contemplate is found." And this, as his followers make clear, is to be done with elaborate, exact detail. We must see, says the English Jesuit Gibbons, "the places where the things we meditate on were wrought, by imagining our selves to be really present at those places; which we must endeavour to represent so lively, as though we saw them indeed, with our corporall eyes; which to perform well, it will help us much to behold before-hande some Image wherein that mistery is well represented, and to have read or heard what good Authors write of those places, and to have noted well the distance from one place to another, the height of the hills, and the situation of the townes and villages. ..."

The "composition of place" is only one of the indications that the arts of memory and of meditation moved from the iconic to the pictorial modes in the 16th and 17th centuries along with the other arts:

It is clear from the various practices mentioned by these writers that there were three different ways of performing this imaginary "composition." The first is to imagine oneself present in the very spot where the events occurred: "to see the arrangements in the holy sepulchre, and the place or house of our Lady, beholding all the parts of it in particular, and likewise her chamber and oratory." The second is to imagine the events as occurring before your eyes "in the very same place where thou art. ..."

The frequently used term for an actor in the 16th century was "rhetorician." Since the rendering of prepared speeches was the only function of these performers it is not surprising that

"places" of memory were built not only into their speeches but into the space in which they performed. This is the theme of Dr. Yates' fifteenth chapter, "The Theatre Memory System of Robert Fludd":

We have always found that the Hermetic or occult philosopher is likely to be interested in the art of memory, and Fludd is no exception to this rule. Coming as he does so very late in the Renaissance, at a time when the Renaissance philosophies are about to give way before the rising movements of the seventeenth century, Fludd erects what is probably the last great monument of Renaissance memory. And, like its first great monument, Fludd's memory system takes a theatre as its architectural form. Camillo's Theatre opened our series of Renaissance memory systems; Fludd's Theatre will close it.

Fludd affords the communication between the private memory system and the public theatre viewed as an image of the world. Dr. Yates had observed this relationship in her earlier volume (1964) *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*:

This classical art, usually regarded as purely mnemotechnical, had a long history in the Middle Ages and was recommended by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. In the Renaissance, it became fashionable among Neoplatonists and Hermeticists. It was now understood as a method of printing basic or archetypal images on the memory, with the cosmic order itself as the "place" system, a kind of inner way of knowing the universe. The principle is already apparent in the passage in Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda* in which he describes how the planetary images or colours, memorised as painted on the vaulted ceiling, organised for the man who had so memorised them, all the individual phenomena which he perceived on coming out of his house. The Hermetic experience of reflecting the universe in the mind is, I believe, at the root of Renaissance magic memory, in which the classical mnemonic with places and images is now understood, or applied, as a method of achieving this experience by imprinting archetypal, or magically activated, images on the memory. By using magical or talismanic images as memory-images, the Magus hoped to acquire universal knowledge, and also powers, obtaining through the magical organisation of the imagination a magically powerful personality, tuned in, as it were, to the powers of the cosmos.

It is in this relation between the art of memory and Hermetic philosophy that Dr. Yates suggests a new connection between Fludd's memory system and the structure of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Dr. Yates' meditations on this theme lead her to conclude that Fludd's Theatre Memory System "contains, as a secret hidden within it, factual information about the Globe Theatre."

A SHAKESPEARE ENCYCLOPAEDIA

Edited by E. G. Quinn and
O. J. Campbell

This authoritative and definitive work will be an indispensable reference book both for the general reader and the Shakespeare specialist. It contains entries on every aspect of the poet's life and works. The entry for each of the plays closes with a section called 'selected criticism', reflecting the changing views of important critics, both past and present. £5

THE TRADITION OF SMOLLETT

Robert Lindsay Giddings

The first full-length critical study of Smollett in the light of the tradition in which he wrote, surveying the development of the picaresque novel before and after Smollett.

Coming in April, 42s

THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM

John Casey

A discussion of the theory and practice of criticism in terms of modern English philosophy considering such problems as the place of emotion in our response to works of art, the objectivity of critical judgements, and the relation between literature and morality.

32s 6d

METHUEN

THE BLOOMSDAY BOOK

A GUIDE THROUGH JOYCE'S
ULYSSES

Harry Blamires

'This will become the standard work of its kind: the job need not be half done again. Harry Blamires has written a straight-forward, unpretentious 263-page paraphrase, labour of love. Severely restricting flights of interpretation to useful cross-reference, he stays close to the text at all times.' *The Guardian* 36s

University Paperback, 18s

THE CHURCH IN EARLY IRISH SOCIETY

Kathleen Hughes

A study of how the Christian Church, whose institutions were evolved in the urban bureaucracy of the Roman Empire, was adapted to the heroic society of early Ireland. Using primary evidence, which has received little attention previously, the author describes how and why the Irish Church ultimately adapted herself to Continental ecclesiastical government. 50s

THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Hans Toch

A systematic study of social movements, ranging from the Black Muslims to food faddists, which describes the needs they serve, the social problems they create, and the dramatic human problems they involve. 35s

After such an erudite trip through the inner world of private memory systems, it might seem possible to bring Stonehenge within the orbit of the memory theatres. Has not the 20th century seen the rise of the most Hermetic of all memory theatres in the form of the Advertising industry with its exotic "places" and its *imagines agentes* on which sense and fancy are lavished by the corporate hand? The range of postures and interests in advertising is almost coextensive with the human unconscious. The unconscious, the greatest of all possible memory theatres, goes outside into the external environment by means of electric technology.

Of Butches and Femmes

The Microcosm. By MAUREEN DUFFY. Hutchinson, 30s.

THE BLURB (a masterpiece of reticence) says that the main characters in Maureen Duffy's latest novel are all women. An English Group? No; a grand tour of lesbianism, and we guarantee to get you back in time for the telly. Perversion without pain, titillation without tears? That would be unfair; but the fact remains that a lot of people will read the book to get the low-down on femmes, butches, drag, bisexuals, etc., and one could have an amusing game (well, fairly amusing) setting selected passages and inviting people to guess the sex of the speaker. There's no doubt that Miss Duffy is what's called a "natural" writer but she is rather a cluttered-up one, and tends to use too many words to describe too few things, like the fashionable essayists of modern leisure-journalism. Her work is a bit tarred with the Eng. Lit. brush, too, with references to Orwell, Coleridge, Emily Brontë, Graves, Blake. And in an earlier novel, *The Single Eye*,¹ the Irish hero who is "placed" as a sub-intellectual photographer, not only talks familiarly about Eliot ("the Rev. himself must be seventy-odd now") but also Cowley: the former we may allow him to have read, as he carefully explains he did, in the sixth form, but the latter? And even Paddy, the back-street heroine and narrator of Miss Duffy's first (and in many ways most original) book² lectures us *en passant* about Shaw's "sharp half-truths" so that one feels the intrusion of an irrelevant literary sensibility. But despite a certain over-insistence, Miss Duffy

does convey the feeling, the texture, of being alive in our time. Just as through Fannon she made us feel what it was like to be a photographer, so, through Matt in *The Microcosm*, she makes us feel what it's like to work at a filling-station; even if Matt's sexual ambivalence ("I thought you was a bloke at first") belongs less to anything which the art of fiction can still create than to the real-life world of girl-boys or the *demi-monde* of last year's advertisements with their equivocal boy-girl holding out the petrol filler-nozzle at the reader, half-gun, half-penis. And there is a brilliant passage near the end of *The Microcosm* describing the act of filling up a car in sexual terms which may be compared to an even better passage in *The Single Eye* describing the act of developing photographs also through sexual imagery.

Apart from briefing us on the difference between sex as physiology and sex as inclination, *The Microcosm* is a good piece of documentary—the main strength of the novel since the 'thirties first threw over poetic fantasy and the "unreal city" of Eliot and Huxley became, in Orwell, more real than the London of any guide-book. The lordly tradition of "Live? our servants can do that for us" which governed the eccentricities of Mrs. Viveash ended with the depression. Then we all had to abandon the rarified luxuries of abstraction or fantasy and roll up our sleeves and do our own living. Orwell may not have been a great *novelist* in the old mandarin sense but he was a magnificent documentary realist, a superb journalist, a copywriter of genius. We don't care much about the relationships between Gordon and Rosemary or Gordon and Ravelston in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, but we are totally involved in what it feels like to have a lousy job, filthy digs, and so on; we feel Orwell got it right, even to the subordination of "art" to advertising; life is not thoughts and ideas but food, drink, sex, tobacco, trips to the country, or the absence of these.

The focus has shifted slightly since the thirties, though we are still in the post-Orwell era. The money's about again, but it still won't buy the gracious vicarious living of the twenties: it *will* buy sex, food, drink, trips to the country, etc.: all the things the wretched Gordon tried to "renounce" yet couldn't live without, the "fixes" of modern life. (Compare the trip to the forest in *The Microcosm* with the famous one in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*.) The affluent era is also the era of do-it-yourself realism. Axel's castle has been finally demolished.

And sex, of course, lies at the heart of do-it-yourself realism:

Alone in my room, I undid the package, read the instructions, got a hard on and had a run-

¹ Panther, 5s.

² *That's How It Was*. Panther, 3s. 6d.